

# 1856 Mutiny of the North Tipperary Militia

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With the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1854 and the resulting demands on military manpower, it was thought appropriate by the military authorities to re-constitute the county militia regiments in Great Britain and Ireland. This was after a period of some forty years during which the ‘Constitutional Force’ had remained effectively dormant, no recruiting having taken place since 1816, with the exception of honorary ranks among the officer corps. The re-constituted militia was to be used for home defence (meaning either of the two islands) and as a conduit for recruitment into the regular army.

Even though recruitment in the initial stages was slow, the militia was seen, for those who joined up, as a source of regular income, board and lodging. The Irish Militia was embodied (the term used to denote the period when the militia was on permanent duty) from January 1855, the regiments taking over the duties of many of the regular battalions who were fighting in the Crimea. With the end of the war, the Irish Militia was disembodied, starting July 1856, meaning that the militiamen would become effectively unemployed (apart from one month’s training a year) with a resulting loss of income and security.

The unease felt at official local level that large numbers of unemployed men were being released into their midst, is reflected in a number of resolutions passed by the Longford Grand Jury at the Summer Assizes of 1856 in a representation to the Lord Lieutenant of that county (in a letter to *The Freeman*): ‘That we are of the opinion that the disembodiment of the militia should not be urged on prematurely, or at least until there was a strong probability that the men thus dismissed would be likely to be absorbed in the labour market’.

In another resolution, the long-term effects of the recent famine were also seen as a cause for worry: ‘That there is every reason to believe that many of the men have no homes or residences to return to, from the extensive emigration which has taken place throughout the country, that to disembody them thus, without homes to return to or wages to support them, would be in our opinion not only unjust and impolite, but tending to endanger the peace of our county and arrest the prosperity we are happy to believe is now existing’.

This is perhaps the background to the mutiny of the North Tipperary Militia (officially called the North Tipperary Light Infantry Militia Regiment - TLI) that took place on July 7 and 8, 1856.

The Tipperary Light Infantry Militia Regiment was, in July 1856, based in Summerhill Barracks in Nenagh. Most of the regiment was billeted at Pound Street Barracks and used to march daily to Summerhill to train and drill. For a week prior to the outbreak of the mutiny, and presumably as part of the winding-down of the permanent status of the Regiment, the recruits had been told that anyone who wished could, on application to the Colonel, obtain his discharge from the Regiment. On Monday 7 July, the soldiers were ordered to give up the new clothing that had been issued to them the previous April. A sergeant started collecting the clothing. However, one man refused to hand back his black trousers and as a result was sent to the guardhouse.

A short time later some of his colleagues from the same Company (No. 4 Company) came to the guardhouse to rescue the imprisoned man. The guards on duty were ordered to fire on the would-be rescuers. This proved impossible, as the guards had no ammunition. The men, however, did not continue with the attempted rescue until, at around 20.30, five companies of the Regiment, who were billeted in Pound Street, appeared in the barracks to carry out their regular drill exercises. Immediately mayhem broke out. Hearing that the man was confined, they simultaneously attached bayonets and rushed at the guardhouse, flinging the guards away and, with guns and stones, broke open the cell doors and released all the prisoners. They then proceeded to completely vandalise the guardhouse.

**Colonel Maude**, Colonel of the Regiment, appeared on the scene and a soldier attempted to stab him.

The gates of the barracks were closed and civilians ordered to leave.

The militiamen said that they would not give up their firearms until assurances were given that they would be paid the residue of their bounty and allowed to keep their clothes. It would appear that the government was attempting not to pay bounty to the militia soldiers (to which they were entitled), giving them only fourteen day's pay in lieu. After a while, the Colonel, with the help of the Major, brought the men into line. He addressed them regarding the gravity of the course of action in which they were engaged. The Parish Priest of Nenagh, **Rev. J. Scanlon**, came into the barracks and talked to the men. He succeeded in calming them, but at the same time, they were firm in their resolve that they would not give up their firearms until their grievances were addressed. That night the men returned to Pound Street barracks amid great excitement and they were loudly cheered as they passed through the streets of the town. Once back at the barracks some of the men threatened the officers present and attempted to further arm themselves.

Next morning, Tuesday 8 July, the militiamen returned to Summerhill barracks.

Some hours later a large number of troops from the 41<sup>st</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> regiments (about 200 in number) arrived from Templemore, entered the town and proceeded to Summerhill barracks, firearms at the ready. Quite inexplicably the gates of the barracks were thrown open and they marched in and formed a line in the Barrack Square. The militiamen formed opposite them and, when ordered to give up their arms, refused to do so. The Riot Act was read and a standoff ensued. As this was happening, a body of militiamen, stragglers who were making their way from Pound Street, arrived outside the barrack gate and started firing. **Stephen Burns**, a private in the TLI fired a shot through the keyhole of the wicket (the small door within the larger barrack gate) and then retreated. Then he reloaded his firearm and approached the gate again. He was heard to say, 'I think I killed one already and I'll kill another'. The gate was opened to allow a militiaman exit. Seeing this, Burns said, 'Clear the way till I have a crack in among them' and then, 'I'll have a crack at the medal man' and killed one of the regular soldiers, **Patrick Curley**.

Curley was wearing his Crimean War campaign medal. Some other stragglers went around the walls of the barracks and fired several shots at the troops, killing three and

wounding two others. One of these militiamen, **John Barron** (or **Barrow**), was later charged with intent to murder some of the 200 soldiers then in the barrack and with intent to murder Colonel **Henry Hort** and Lieutenant **Thomas Young** (for which crimes he was sentenced to fifteen years transportation). Also charged with Barron were **William Cummins**, **Thomas Carr**, **Cornelius Ryan** and **Edward Laffan** (1). All were later detained at Mountjoy Prison, Dublin). A party of troops was sent to round up the stragglers but were subjected to sniper-fire by the fleeing militiamen. It appears that at this stage the militiamen in the barracks decided to leave and make their way back to Pound Street.

**General Chatterton** arrived at 17.00 and a party of regular troops (probably from the 30<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup> regiments) arrived from Birr at 19.00 to reinforce those from Templemore.

Fighting between the militiamen and the regular troops continued until 21.00, mainly in the area of Pound Street. The *Limerick Reporter* stated that the regular troops acted imprudently, firing into nearly every house on one side of Pound Street and killing an inoffensive man called **Peter Gibbons**. The paper also stated that **Colonel Maude** should have stood by his men and had he shown the slightest bit of kindness, the men could have been persuaded to stay in barracks.

The final tally of wounded in the barracks was six among the militiamen and ten among the regular troops. It was reported that three militiamen were killed. It was thought that more of the fleeing militiamen were also wounded. By 23.00 the men had been rounded up and peace re-established.

An inquest into the deaths was held a couple of days later. Concerning **Patrick Curley**, 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment, who was killed at the wicket and was a native from the vicinity of Templemore, had fought in three battles of the Crimea (Alma, Inkerman and Sebastopol) and left a wife and three children to mourn his loss, the following verdict was returned by the jury: ‘The deceased came to death from a gunshot wound inflicted by some persons unknown’. In the cases of the deaths of **M. Tracy** and **Denis Tuohy**, the jury returned the same verdict. In the case of **Peter Gibbons**, who was shot down by some of the 55<sup>th</sup> Regiment without any provocation whatsoever, ‘he being a most inoffensive man and a pensioner besides’, the jury returned the following verdict: ‘Deceased came to his death from the effects of a gun-shot wound inflicted by a soldier of the 55<sup>th</sup> Regiment; that such firing was unjustifiable; and that the troops might have used more discretion in firing into the house of a respectable man, having fired ten rounds into deceased house’.

Notwithstanding the verdict of the inquest jury, a week later **Stephen Burns** was sentenced to death for killing **Patrick Curley** of the 41<sup>st</sup> Regiment.

In its summing-up of the happenings in Nenagh, the *Newry Examiner* of July 12 1856 stated, ‘We are sorry to find that the “North Tipperary” were about to be disbanded under circumstances which occasioned a mutiny, attended with riot and serious loss of life. Their conduct is inexcusable; but a general impression prevails that they had some grounds of complaint. This however would be no justification of their

disorderly and mutinous proceedings, which were attended with results so melancholy'.

On Tuesday 2 September, upwards of eighty men of the TLI were marched from the county jail, where they had been confined since the mutiny, to Summerhill barracks, where **Major-General Sir John Chatterton** addressed them. Much of what he said was inaudible to the men but when he was finished, **Major Foster** of the TLI read out the conclusions of Court Martial procedures that had been taken against the worst of the offenders (2):

**Private Patrick Thumpane:** Charged with discharging a loaded firelock into the barrack-square where troops of the line were drawn up. Verdict: Guilty. To be transported for life.

**Private Thomas Gleeson** (Tried with Devereux, below): Charged (a) with inciting soldiers to fix bayonets and charge the guardhouse, (b) charging at **Captain Adjutant Hort** with bayonet fixed and (c) releasing prisoners confined in the guardhouse. Verdict: Guilty. To be transported for life.

**Private Thomas Devereux:** Charged with mutinous conduct (a) with exciting a mutiny on exiting Pound Street Barracks, (b) at the same place, refusing to obey the orders of a superior officer, (c) threatening **Captain Hort** with fixed bayonet at the charge and saying, 'tis all very fine, but you are the very one who ordered the guard to load with ball cartridge' or words to that effect, (d) assaulting **Color-sergeant Henry Cole** and forcibly taking from him a quantity of ball and ammunition, (e) for mutinous behaviour by saying 'let us shiver the bloody officers who are out, and let us have some fun for our money'. Verdict: Guilty. To be transported for life.

**Private Thomas Cauley:** Charged with taking part in the mutiny and with having fired at troops of the line. Verdict: Guilty. To be transported for life.

**Private Stephen Skelton:** Charged (a) with attacking **Sergeant Charles Kelly** of the TLI, (b) breaking open an arms chest of No. 8 Company TLI, (c) at about 10.00 PM executing a mutiny at Pound Street barracks, (d) refusing to obey the order of a superior officer, **Lieutenant Ralph Hall Bunbury**, (e) offering violence against the same Ralph Hall Bunbury. Verdict: Guilty. Sentenced to transportation for 21 years.

**Private Patrick Nolan:** Charged with taking part in the mutiny of the TLI and with having fired at troops of the line. Verdict: Guilty. To be transported for 21 years.

(Transportation records (3) note a Private **William Nolan**, sentenced to 21 years transportation with penal servitude. Convict's sentence was commuted to penal servitude for 6 years and later to 4 years. Nothing more is known of him, and this may, in fact, be the Patrick Nolan noted above).

**Private Henry Bennett:** Charged with taking part in the mutiny of the TLI. Verdict: Guilty. Sentenced to 14 years transportation.

**Private Thomas Fleming:** Charged with taking part in the mutiny of the TLI. Verdict: Guilty. To be transported for 14 years. (Later commuted to 4 years penal servitude, and later commuted to 2 years penal servitude. Detained at Mountjoy Gaol, Co. Dublin 13/9/1856 & Spike Island Gaol, Co. Cork, 25/6/1857 (4)).

**Private Patrick Maher:** Charged with firing at Her Majesty's troops of the line. Verdict: Guilty. To be imprisoned for two years and kept to hard labour.

**Major-General Chatterton** again addressed the men saying that now they could see what these acts of mutiny and insubordination had brought upon the heads of their comrades and then advised them that Her Majesty had been pleased to extend her clemency towards them as **Major Foster** then made clear.

The death sentence on **Stephen Burns** was commuted to transportation for life. Earlier sentences of fifteen years transportation passed on four other militiamen - presumably **Cummins, Carr, Ryan** and **Laffan** (5) -, was commuted to four year's penal servitude. In the cases of **Trumpane, Gleeson, Devereux** (6) and **Cauley**, sentences were commuted from transportation for twenty-one years to ten year's penal servitude. In the cases of **Skelton** (7) and **Nolan** sentences were commuted from twenty-one year's transportation to four year's penal servitude.

As to the original complaints of the men regarding clothing, the Major-General offered few crumbs of comfort. Uniforms would have to be handed in. If any of the men required clothing, this would be provided and the costs deducted from the disembodiment allowances. The TLI was finally disembodied on 8 September 1856.

In October 1857, following the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, the Militia was again embodied, this time for a period of three years. Not surprisingly, the North Tipperary Light Infantry Militia was one of the very few regiments not to be called up for duty.

### Footnotes:

(1) NAI Transportation Records, ref TR 14, p 121

(2) *The Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser* 3 Sep. 1856

(3) NAI TR, ref TR 14, p 159

(4) NAI TR, ref TR 14, p 159

(5) In the case of Laffan and Ryan see also NAI TR, ref TR 14, p 121

(6) In the case of Gleeson and Devereux, see also NAI TR, ref TR 14, p, 158

(7) Convict ordered to be discharged (by Lord Lieutenant's order) 7 Jan 1859. NAI Transportation Records, ref TR 14 p159

### Sources:

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